

Plan for North Lawndale to Tackle Vacant Lots, Economic Development

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Aerial view in 2011 shows parts of North Lawndale and East Garfield Park (Ian Freimuth / Flickr)

Rodney Brown has many ties to North Lawndale. His wife was born in the community, and he's worked there for 20 years. Recently, he's been thinking about the area's economic development and how to showcase its potential. He also says this type of grassroots organizing is increasingly defining the West Side community.

Brown volunteers with a group called the [North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council](#). Formed in 2015 with a grant from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, or CMAP, the council is made up of individuals, community organizations, business owners and elected officials. Together, they form strategic plans to build up the community, from creating jobs to improving the built environment.

"This area has been forgotten for more than 50 years," said Sheila McNary, the head of NLCCC's arts and culture subcommittee – one of 13 groups that focus on everything from sports and recreation to public safety. "We're creating some positive things that we can talk about, and we can grow from there."

Last fall, NLCCC and CMAP published an ["Existing Conditions Report"](#) about the community, which offered an overview of current conditions in preparation for developing a shared vision for growth. They've also conducted more than a dozen meetings on the area's future, and have hosted community events and arts festivals. Last week, the NLCCC announced the next steps in establishing a comprehensive quality of life plan.

The plan, which will eventually be presented to the city, is expected to establish a 10- to 15-year vision for the community's physical environment and outline the steps to realize it. Through meetings with those who "work, worship, live and care about" the neighborhood, Brown said that certain focus areas have already been identified.

For example, the “Existing Conditions” report found that 18 percent of land in North Lawndale is vacant. Community members surveyed said the issue of vacant lots and buildings is among the top three challenges facing the neighborhood. Economic development and public safety ranked first and second among survey respondents.

Brown said the NLCCC will seek input on how to best use these vacant lots at [a June 3 conference](#). Last year, lots were sold for \$1 to area homeowners, and there has since been an increase in community gardens.

Gentrification is also an issue of concern among community members, who see their proximity to downtown and ample housing as appealing. Brown and McNary say the NLCCC wants to publish its plan in the next year to ensure neighborhood growth is in line with community needs.

“If we don’t do this now, the voice of the community won’t be heard,” said Brown. “Growth is going to happen one way or another, but whether the community has a say isn’t inevitable.”

In the meantime, NLCCC is continuing to work with CMAP to host community forums and events. There have been Sunday night movies in Douglas Park, and the second annual arts festival is scheduled for Aug. 5.

“We want to enhance the image of North Lawndale,” Brown said. “The public doesn’t see the organizations working to build North Lawndale. There’s development going on, and we want them to see the potential of the community.”